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English language classroom practices: Bangladeshi primary school children's perceptions

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Abstract

English language teaching (ELT) has been investigated from various angles including how English language teachers perceive what happens in an ELT classroom. How primary school English language learners perceive their experiences of ELT is rarely reported in the published literature, particularly from developing countries such as Bangladesh. This article reports on a study that examined Bangladeshi primary school learners' experience of English language classroom practices in which technology-enhanced communicative language teaching activities were promoted through a project called English in Action (EIA). EIA is a large-scale 9-year long international English language development project in Bangladesh, funded by the UK government. A semi-structured group interview was conducted with 600 Grade 3 students from different regions of Bangladesh. The findings showed that the learners found communicative language learning activities such as dialogue and role play more effective than translation and memorising grammar rules for learning English, although they enjoyed reciting and drills. The results also showed that these learners' English teachers tended to mix both traditional and communicative approaches in their lessons. The paper critiques EIA and argues that any major language development project needs to consider the local context and learners' views on language learning for its success.

Keywords

primary learner perceptions, English language teaching, English in Action, Bangladesh

Introduction

This study reports on an investigation into learner perceptions and their experiences of English language classroom practices in Bangladeshi primary schools which participated in a major language development project called English in Action (EIA). EIA is a £50 million, 9-year project aiming to help 25 million people in Bangladesh improve their ability to use English language for social and economic purposes, requested by the government of Bangladesh, and funded by Department for International Development, UK. This project has designed and developed teacher professional development activities and resources enhanced by the use of mobile technologies, for use by primary (Grades 1 – 5) and secondary (Grades 6 – 10) school teachers, thereby reaching millions of school children. The project has a consortium of international and national partners. The project is led and managed by BMB Mott McDonald, The Open University (UK) and The British Broadcast Corporation (BBC) Media Action Group.

The project aimed to promote Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) techniques in primary schools through various interventions such as classroom materials and school-based teacher support. In the context of EIA, a weaker version of CLT, which included some grammar teaching with communicative functions, was used. This study explored one of the ways that could illuminate the impact of the EIA interventions on learners, namely learners' perceived experience of English language classroom practices.

In this paper, studies on learner perceptions are briefly reviewed, followed by a description of the methodology employed in the study. Next, the findings are presented and discussed in the context of the project.

Learner perceptions of English language learning

Communicative approaches in their various forms have been practised in English language teaching (ELT) for over three decades and yet, their application by classroom teachers has often met with challenges. Despite resistance from teachers, particularly those accustomed to the 'knowledge transmission' model of learning, CLT has been

introduced to the national English language curriculum in many countries where English is used as a second or foreign language such as India, Taiwan and more recently in Bangladesh. In order to assess the effectiveness of such application of CLT to ELT classrooms, many studies have been carried out (e.g., Hamid and Baldauf, 2008, Savignon and Wang, 2003, TQI-SEP, 2007, Kolb, 2007). However, with the exception of Kolb (2007), most of the published studies have examined teachers' perceptions about CLT or ELT in classroom. In this paper, perception refers to teachers or their learners' experience of teaching or learning a language and what it means to them based on that experience and their own knowledge. These perception studies tend to have ignored learner perceptions and their experience in the classroom and they are often small in scale. In fact, such studies are rarely reported in the context of developing countries except in university dissertations (for example, see Hamid, 2009 in a Bangladeshi context).

Among the relevant published studies, Kolb's (2007) research examined 43 learners' perceptions with regard to learning English as a foreign language (EFL) in two German primary school classes. The data were collected through ranking activities, selecting learning strategies, and completing the sentence 'Learning English is like ...' by learners. Additionally eight learners from each of the two classes were interviewed. The study found that primary school EFL learners can articulate their language learning strategies and beliefs about the language if appropriate methods are used.

Barkhuizen (1998) investigated learner perceptions in the context of English as a second or foreign language in a South African secondary school. He used a 'multi-method' qualitative approach for this study which included a survey, writing, individual and group interviews and classroom observation, resulting in a very rich data set. However, regarding the scale, the survey was conducted with 200 students and was limited to one school. This study showed that the students perceived the 'mechanical activities' (grammar, spelling and punctuation) to be high ranking language learning activities, a finding which surprised their teachers.

Likewise, Hawkey (2006) conducted a study in the context of a language education reform project in Italy, which included the data from student surveys (228), teacher and

parent interviews and classroom observations in seven schools. As in Barkhuizen's (1998) study, there was a mismatch between the perceptions of the effectiveness of different teaching and learning strategies between teachers and the students.

As mentioned earlier, almost all the published studies on learner perceptions were carried out in the context of developed or semi-developed countries. There is little evidence as to what primary learners from developing countries think about language learning, in particular, English language. Additionally, the use of technology in language learning is still under-researched in the context of developing countries including Bangladesh (see Power and Shrestha, 2010). The present study investigated learner attitudes and perceptions regarding their experience of learning English language enhanced by mobile technologies in a large-scale project.

This study explored the following two research questions:

What is the current experience of primary students in English lessons in EIA intervention schools?

What are the perceptions and attitudes of primary students regarding English language and its learning in EIA intervention schools?

These research questions were used to investigate the classroom English language practices in EIA schools during the project and to gauge if the EIA interventions had any impact. The second question explored what kind of language learning perceptions and beliefs students brought to the language classroom.

Methodology

In order to explore the research questions, a qualitative method was adopted by collecting the data through semi-structured learner interviews. Interviewing young children is often challenging given the age (8 – 9 years) of the primary school EFL learners in this study (see, for example, Irwin and Johnson, 2005). In order to address some of the challenges, the interviewers built rapport with the children prior to the interview. Additionally, instead of individual, group interviews were conducted to make the children comfortable. The semi-structured student group interviews helped to obtain in-depth information regarding students' views of English language learning and the use of technology in the

classroom. The student group interviews were carried out in Bangla, the participants' mother tongue. The data were later translated into English.

Training researchers

The field-work for this study was carried out by 15 researchers from 5 July till 5 August 2010 across six Divisions in Bangladesh. In June 2010, these researchers had at least five days of hands-on training regarding the use of the data collection instrument (i.e., semi-structured interviews) including some piloting of the instrument (see Appendix). This training was to maximise the reliability of the data collection.

In addition, guidance notes for conducting the interview were designed in order to standardise the method of using the instrument.

Data sample

The data were collected following a random sampling method while selecting the participants. That is, out of 200 primary schools participating in the EIA project, 100 were randomly selected. A student group interview (SGI) was conducted with Grade 3 learners (8-9 year olds) in each of the 100 schools. Each SGI consisted of six students of mixed or single gender, depending on the available student demography of the selected grade. Altogether 100 SGIs were conducted which included 600 primary students in total.

Ethical issues

While collecting the data, a culturally appropriate approach was taken to ensure that there were no ethical concerns regarding this study. That is, all students were asked for their verbal consents for the study and permissions were taken from the concerned head teachers and the teachers in all schools. The interviews were not audio-recorded as this could be intimidating to the young children. Instead, the researchers produced summary notes during and immediately after the interviews.

Data analysis

The interview data were qualitatively analysed. Based on the semi-structured interview questions, the interview responses were examined for their recurrent themes. For this, three levels of analysis were carried out by two independent researchers. Following a

grounded approach, first, an initial analysis was conducted which identified the key themes emerging from the interview data. The data were further analysed to refine the emergent themes by the first independent researcher. A third level analysis was carried out by the author who examined the main thematic categories and sub-categories such as 'traditional language learning practice' (main category) and 'grammar rules' (sub-category).

Since the interviews were not audio-recorded for practical and ethical reasons, the students' responses were noted by the researchers as their field-notes in English or Bangla. Field notes in Bangla were later translated into English. Therefore, anything quoted from the students in this article is not a direct quote but an interpretation and translation by the concerned researcher.

Extracts (called 'quotes' in this paper) from the researcher field notes are used to illustrate a particular theme found in the data. Where possible, the relevant context for the 'quote' is described. Given that the 'quotes' were not directly from the students interviewed, where the meaning is affected, grammatical infelicities or inaccuracies were edited which are indicated by square brackets [].

Findings and discussion

The analysis of the data revealed two main themes: (1) traditional English language learning practices and (2) communicative language learning practices. The first refers to teaching and learning language by following the so called 'grammar-translation' method which typically requires students to learn grammar rules and translate sentences from the target language into their mother tongue and vice versa (Harmer, 2007). Speaking skills are almost completely ignored in this method. On the other hand, communicative language learning is concerned with students' communicative competence in the target language through a sequence of activities which focus both on meaning and form. All four language skills (i.e., listening, speaking, reading and writing) are equally emphasised in communicative language learning. Within these two broad thematic categories, other sub-categories also emerged which are described and illustrated below. The order of the themes for each sub-category is presented according to how frequently they were

mentioned by the students interviewed. That is, the most frequently mentioned theme appears first, followed by those mentioned less frequently.

Traditional English language learning practices

This section presents the findings that are related to traditional English language learning practices as defined earlier. First, current traditional classroom practices as perceived by the students are reported. Second, students' attitudes towards traditional practices are described. Finally, students' beliefs about traditional English language learning are presented.

Existing practices

Teachers' use of Bangla. The previous classroom observation study by EIA (EIA, 2010) indicated that, although English was being used in most classroom there was nevertheless a group of teachers who persisted in speaking mainly in Bangla. The student interview data showed that some teachers continue to use Bangla most of the time in their English lessons. However, the use of Bangla did not seem to have a negative impact on the students' enjoyment of the lesson as shown by the first two 'quotations' below:

Mostly he spoke in Bangla. We enjoyed the class... [7.6.1]¹

He spoke in Bangla mostly. The class was good. [8.5.1]

Memorising/ reciting poems. The other classroom practice associated with traditional language learning, as shown by the interview data, was reciting and memorising poems. Several groups of students reported that they recited and memorised poems in their recent English lessons as illustrated by the 'quotes' below:

Then the teacher told us to memorise the poem. We memorised it in the classroom, then teacher asked some of us to say the poem. [5.5.1]

At first madam recited a poem from book. Then we all recited together with audio and after learnt by heart ... also. [4.4.1]

We recited it [poem] with our teacher. Our teacher recited one line and we recited the next line. [14.2.1]

¹ This number refers to the researcher, the interview group and the respondent.

Reading and writing. Reading and writing activities were reported being conducted in more recent English lessons. Although it is difficult to understand the actual nature of such activities, they seem to be more teacher-led and less communicative as shown by the ‘quotes’ below:

We read a story on *Hare & Tortoise* from the book... [9.3.1]

In the last class teacher asked to [read] a story from the text and we read that, after reading teacher asked some questions in English and we respond also in English.

After that we wrote some words whatever teacher asked to write... [13.2.1]

These reading and writing activities indicate that despite the EIA intervention, there is not sufficient evidence of the use of a more communicative approach to reading and writing. The teachers seem to continue their old habit.

Drills. Drills are generally associated with the audiolingual approach to language learning in which a stimulus – response – reinforcement pattern is followed (Harmer, 2007). Although drills are not directly linked with grammar-translation method, they are considered traditional due to them being mechanical (i.e., not focusing on meaning but structures).

In this study, drills were mentioned by several groups of students during the interview. It is also notable that drills varied from single words to a whole rhyme (poem) as illustrated by the ‘quotes’ below:

We also practiced some sentence drilling. [2.5.1]

She [taught] a rhyme from the text book with drilling...[12.3.1]

Attitudes towards English language learning

The students expressed positive attitudes towards reciting and drills, and negative views towards memorising, the use of Bangla by the teacher, the audio (songs, rhymes, dialogues and stories) and the ill-treatment of students by the teacher. Each of these sets of views is described and illustrated below.

Reciting and drills – positive views. In the previous section, it was shown that drills and reciting poems were happening quite frequently in English lessons. The student attitudes towards these activities seemed positive as elucidated by the ‘quotations’ below:

I also like sentence drilling. [2.5.3]

I like singing song, reciting poems... [7.4.3]

I like repeating words with my teacher. [15.6.3]

These attitudes may not be surprising given that the primary school materials contain many rhymes and songs which the students seemed to have enjoyed in their English lessons. More importantly, reciting and drills are widely practised and the EIA intervention may not have had any impact on this practice. This might suggest adjusting the ELT methodology adopted by EIA.

Corporal punishment and rebuking by the teacher. Some students reported that their English teachers would rebuke or give them corporal punishment (e.g., beating) if they fail to complete the given task successfully as illustrated by the ‘quotes’ below:

One thing I don't like is that when the teacher rebukes. [1.6.4]

We don't like it when the teacher beats us [when] we aren't able to give our lessons to him. Our teacher says that “Beating is a proper education”.

[4.2.4]

One may argue that corporal punishment is deeply rooted in the socio-cultural context of Bangladeshi education system (and South Asia) and so it is not surprising that teachers still give their students physical punishment (see Shohel and Howes, 2008). However, this kind of punishment is likely to contribute negatively to the classroom learning environment. As indicated in the third ‘quote’ above, this kind of practice by English teachers may have resulted from their view of learning processes.

Absence of the audio. Quite a small number of the students said that they did not like English lessons without the audio. This may show the popularity of the mobile technology and the audio materials used with it. Here are some ‘quotes’ that illustrate their view:

... If [the] teacher [does] not take the class or do not play the audio I don't like it.
[2.6.4]

... Sometimes our teacher comes to our class without audio, then we don't enjoy the class. [10.2.4]

Dislike of memorising. Some students reported that they do not like memorising many English lessons, answers to questions in their textbooks and the spelling of difficult words:

I don't like to memorise so many lessons. [2.5.4]

The things I don't like about our English classes are memorising answers to questions and hard spellings. [9.1.4]

I don't like question answer exercise. We memorise those from the guide book.
[7.7.4]

These 'quotes' may suggest that some EIA teachers do not make their lessons fun and communicative. Instead, they still rely on the old 'tried and tested' technique of memorising the content of the textbook. This means EIA professional development materials and the teacher support mechanism did not sufficiently support these teachers and therefore they were not confident to use a more communicative approach in their English language lessons.

Dislike of teacher's use of Bangla. A few students reported that they do not like it when their teacher uses Bangla instead of English in their class:

... When teachers mostly use Bangla we do not like this. [11.2.4]

I don't like it when the teacher uses Bangla rather than English.
[2.1.4]

It is, however, not clear why the students do not like their teacher using Bangla in their class.

Student beliefs about English language learning

The interview data were limited in terms of student beliefs about traditional English language learning practices. Here 'language learning belief' refers to what English

language learning means to students, which may have been influenced by their socio-cultural and educational environments. The interview data showed that some students believed that drills and rhymes are the ‘best’ for learning English language. A positive attitude was expressed towards these two in the preceding section. This kind of student belief about English language learning may suggest a low impact of the EIA intervention on these students and their teachers. The ‘quotes’ below indicate the student beliefs about drills and rhymes in learning English:

I think rhymes and drilling is best. [7.1.1]

We think ... drilling are best for learning English. [15.5.1]

Communicative language learning practices

In this section, the results that are associated with communicative language learning are presented, again in order of frequency of occurrence. As in the previous section, the results are reported in terms of the existing practices, student attitudes and their beliefs regarding English language learning as shown by the student group interviews.

Existing practices

Use of songs. The majority of the students interviewed mentioned that in their recent lessons, they either listened to songs or sang songs, or both. This is directly linked with the supplementary materials provided in the EIA project, which include songs such as ‘Good morning’, ‘Hello’ and ‘Goodbye’ among others. The interview data suggest that most teachers are using songs in their lessons, making them fun and enjoyable. Here are some ‘quotes’ that reflect the use of songs in the classroom:

Sometime teacher plays song or rhyme from the audio... [2.4.1]

In our last English class at first we sang the Good Morning song and Hello song in chorus... [3.3.1]

After exchanging greetings with our teacher, we sang the Hello song with iPod and clapped hands... [10.6.1]

The ‘quotes’ above indicate that the students sing in English in their English class. However, there does not seem to be any variety in the use of songs because almost all the

students mentioned only ‘Good morning’ and ‘Hello’ songs. It is also equally possible that the students remembered only these. However, it may be argued that students singing the song does not mean that it is an application of CLT. There is no data to substantiate a meaningful use of songs introduced by EIA. Thus, it might be possible that the students sing these two songs as their routine.

Use of posters, pictures and flash cards (visual aids). Another recurrent theme found in the interview data was the use of visual aids which included posters, pictures and flashcards in particular. The mention of these visual aids might suggest the good use of the posters, pictures and flashcards provided by EIA. The following ‘quotes’ from the students show the use of the visual aids in their English lessons:

We see some poster which is attractive and helpful to learn our lesson.

[2.3.1]

... the teacher showed us some flash cards and asked us to draw the picture of football and mango on our notebook. Boys drew the picture of football and girls drew the picture of mango. [3.2.1]

... Then showed the flash cards of 'seven days' and asked the name of the day showing a particular flash card. Then teacher asked us to work in pairs through questioning and answering. [1.3.1]

These ‘quotes’ demonstrate that a variety of activities are conducted by the EIA teachers by using posters, pictures and flashcards in their English lessons. This is an indication of the popularity of the visual aids provided by EIA among primary school students and teachers. Nevertheless, how meaningfully these resources are regularly used by teachers is still a question for EIA.

Use of audio devices (iPods and speakers). Given that the primary schools were provided with audio materials for classroom use, almost all students interviewed reported the use of audio devices, that is, iPods and speakers, in their English classes in which they listened to songs, rhymes, poems and dialogues on the iPod. This suggests the frequent use of audio in EIA primary schools and hence a potential success indicator of the project:

We have listened to a rhyme 'sleepy head' from the audio. Then we repeated this altogether with clapping. Our teacher asked us to repeat the rhyme.

[7.7.1]

We heard an audio song from the iPod and we sang the song in chorus and then sang in group. [8.3.1]

After that we listened to the sounds in iPod and played the role of birds and animals like bee, owl cat etc... [10.1.1]

As can be seen from the 'quotes' the audio (iPod) was used for songs and rhymes in speaking activities in English. Often the audio seems to have worked as an oral input that served as a model for repetition by the students. Additionally, as shown by the final 'quote', the audio (sounds) seems to have been used in a creative way.

Pair and group work. Pair and group work was also very frequently mentioned in the student interviews. This may have enabled participatory or interactive English lessons in the EIA primary schools. The use of pair and group work by the EIA teachers suggests that the teachers have started employing communicative language learning activities in their lessons. Nonetheless, it remains to be seen how communicative group and pair activities were because such activities can be mechanical too.

These 'quotes' below illustrate the kind of pair and group work that the students participated in their English lessons:

We read a story on *Hare & Tortoise* from the book. He asked us [to] work in pairs. [9.3.1]

In our last class teacher asked us questions like "what is your name?", "how old are you?" Teacher said and we repeated with her. Then we had a pair work to practice these questions/answers. [5.1.1]

... after singing madam divided us [into] some groups. We read a story in our group and we discussed the story. After sometimes madam asked us some questions in English about the story and we answered her... [14.1.1]

The second 'quote' above indicates the nature of the pair work activity in the lesson where the teacher presents how to ask questions to find out personal information from

others. Then, the students practise those questions with each other (pair work), which seems a meaningful communicative activity. The final quote indicates a slightly more open group task, indicating a better grasp of a communicative approach by the teacher. However, it should be noted that these good practices come from only a small number of schools and therefore, the majority of the EIA teachers may not have fully engaged with EIA's ELT approach.

Playing games. Playing games featured as another common theme related to communicative language learning. Many of the students interviewed reported that they played games such as 'bingo' in their last English lesson.

She also said to practise the numbering game... [12.4.1]

We played bingo game... [6.3.1]

We also played some game such as; bingo game, puzzle game etc.

[2.6.1]

Although it is difficult to understand how the games were played for learning English and that there are only a few games mentioned, these students' 'quotes' do indicate that their teachers are using games in their classroom. Games may be useful if they are integrated into the whole lesson. If they are treated as simply 'games' to have some fun and pass time, there may be no language learning occurring. Therefore, further studies are needed for any evidence of language learning.

Use of English in the classroom. The use of more spoken English is associated with communicative English language learning. The student interview data show that most of the students' teachers use English in their English lessons most of the time (as indicated in the EIA observation study; EIA, 2010) compared to the baseline study (EIA, 2009), and use Bangla only when the students do not understand English. It may be that the EIA teachers are using more English than they used to in their English lessons. This change may be linked with the materials and the professional development support offered to these teachers in the project. However, this should be treated with caution because using more English does not mean communicative language teaching. The students may not

have understood the teacher. Additionally, as noted previously, some teachers persistently use Bangla in their English language lessons.

Here are some ‘quotes’ that illuminate the use of English in EIA primary schools:

In our classroom, our teacher uses English a lot. When our teacher translated the hard lesson and poem, we like it. [2.1.1]

Madam uses English and Bengali both but most of the time she speaks in English. [4.1.1]

Our teacher spoke English most of the time. Teacher uses English at the time of greetings, giving instruction, describing posters. When we can't understand English teacher says it in Bangla.

[10.7.1]

The final ‘quote’ above gives details of when the English teacher uses English: greeting, giving instructions to students, and describing posters. To aid understanding, Bangla was used. Although greetings may not count as a change in the teacher practice, both giving instructions and describing posters in English indicate an important step towards implementing a more communicative approach to teaching English.

Student attitudes towards English language learning

In this section, the students’ attitudes towards English language learning by using a more communicative approach are reported.

Singing/ listening to songs and reciting poems. Singing and listening to songs and reciting poems were very popular among the students interviewed. They all said that they enjoy singing or listening to songs in English. Also, they like reciting poems in English. The following quotes indicate how popular these activities were among the students:

I like singing song and reciting rhyme most... [3.2.3]

In our English class we like most recit[ing] poem in English, questions answer and listening songs from iPod. [6.1.3]

We like to listen to the audio song and to sing in group. [8.1.3]

We like singing song, it is very enjoyable and we love to sing song in chorus.
[8.5.3]

Songs and rhymes are embedded in all EIA materials. This popularity of songs and rhymes demonstrates the fruitfulness of these materials.

Playing games. In addition to singing or listening to songs and rhymes/ poems, many students expressed a very positive attitude towards playing games, which is probably natural to primary school students. Given the fun and spontaneity that games offer to them, it is not surprising that they liked them. The selected 'quotes' below illuminate what the students had to say:

In our English class we like most to play game...[6.3.3]

We like most playing different kinds of games...[6.4.3]

We like playing Bingo game, listening audio lessons and songs and vocabulary game. [13.4.3]

Pair and group work. The students reported that they enjoy pair and group work in their English lessons. This shows their preference for more participatory and interactive activities in English lessons. Here are some selective 'quotes' that illustrate this view from the students:

I like working in groups or pairs with my classmates... [1.1.3]

I like to work in group. In a group we can discuss with each other which seems very interesting... [10.2.3]

We like group work most, because all students participate in this. [5.3.3]

We love the group work most because in that we can share our views with others most. [5.4.3]

It is also interesting to note that some students are fully aware of the value of group or pair work as mentioned in the last three 'quotes' above.

Listening to the audio. The audio materials included songs, rhymes, stories and dialogues. The data regarding the audio were generally linked with listening to songs or

rhymes and practising them with the media player (iPod). The following ‘quotes’ indicate the positive student attitudes towards the audio:

We like to hear the songs and rhymes of iPod which are easier and very helpful ...
[10.3.3]

The iPod songs are very enjoyable... [10.2.3]

I like to hear songs, rhymes and speaking from the iPod... [2.4.3]

However, the reference to the songs and the rhymes may suggest a limited use of the audio materials and possibly less learner-centred activities.

Visuals. The students that were interviewed often referred to the visuals used in the English lessons, which they liked. These included posters, flashcards and pictures. Such visuals are often considered invaluable language learning materials, and the ones mentioned here were provided by EIA. The selected ‘quotes’ below show the students’ preference for the visuals:

... I like singing songs, reciting poems, using posters or flash cards... [1.7.3]

I like to learn English with flash cards and posters... [4.6.3]

The pictures of posters are very attractive. So we like these. [10.4.3]

Posters, flashcards and pictures are generally linked with communicative activities. The student attitudes being positive towards such educational artefacts indicate a positive impact of the project.

Role play. In addition to visuals, the students who were interviewed mentioned that they enjoy participating in role-play activities. Role play is also one of the techniques promoted in the EIA materials to encourage creativity and enhance communicative fluency in the classroom. The students seemed to be delighted by role play activities as shown by the ‘quotes’ below:

We like to learn English by acting, I like pair work and like to learn by playing also. [4.1.3]

We all enjoy role playing most. [5.1.3]

Role play gives me much pleasure because it is so funny and interesting.

[3.7.3]

Writing and reading. Some students also reported that they like reading and writing in their English lessons. However, it is not clear what kind of reading or writing they prefer, based on what they said:

I like reading from textbook... I like writing tasks...[4.6.3]

I love writing and reading. I enjoy reading with madam. [4.4.3]

We like to read English the text book in the class. [12.3.3]

Students' beliefs about English language learning

This section reports on the findings related to students' beliefs about English language learning in a more communicative way. The findings in this section were drawn from the student interview data which are limited, as with the findings for beliefs about traditional language learning practices discussed earlier.

The students' beliefs about learning English were based on which type of activities or techniques they believed to be 'best' for learning English. According to these students, the methods/ techniques that help the most to learn English are: songs and rhymes (audio - iPod), pair and group work, playing games (e.g., Bingo), listening to stories, role play, and working with posters and flashcards. All of these are heavily promoted in the EIA materials and therefore, it can be argued that EIA appears to have been responding to the needs of the project beneficiaries (i.e., students).

The following are some 'quotes' that indicate student beliefs about communicative English language learning:

The best kinds of activities for learning English are games and songs, because they make us interested in our lesson. [9.3.1]

The activities best for learning are using audio, singing song, flash card, model and poster. [12.2.1]

... the role playing activities, group work and pair work are the best for learning. [12.4.1]

Audio songs and role play are best for our English learning. [6.2.1]

It will be great if the songs and rhymes of the iPod are increased. [2.1.3]

Conclusion

The findings from this study suggest that the current English language classroom practices in primary schools in the EIA project are moving towards a more communicative approach to language learning to some extent. There is evidence from students that teachers use pair and group work, role play, dialogues, audio (listening materials) and pictures in their English lessons. One may argue that this is a success indicator of the EIA project. However, these findings should be treated with caution. Specifically, the data did not indicate in detail how these activities and materials have been applied to the classrooms which classroom observation data could reveal, a separate study conducted within the project.

EIA aimed to promote more English in the classroom. In this respect, there seemed to be some success as this study revealed that there is evidence of teachers using more English than Bangla. However, this was contradicted by some students whose teachers persistently used Bangla, which may be treated as resistance to change or their lack of English language skills. Even when teachers used more English, it appears that the activities were teacher-centred as confirmed by the classroom observation study (e.g., see Hamid and Honan, 2012). This is against the goal of CLT.

The student attitudes towards communicative language learning appeared to be favourable among primary students as in other studies (e.g., Savignon and Wang, 2003). This may have been resulted from the student participation in the EIA interventions. On the other hand, the aspects associated with a more traditional approach to language learning such as reciting and drills were perceived positively by the students as in a South African study by Barkhuizen (1998). This shows that EIA needs to seriously consider how these learner perceptions can be addressed through its ELT approach. There are two possible responses to this: that EIA's ELT methodology needs to embrace both traditional and communicative approaches to take into account students' perceptions; that student attitudes need to be discussed in the classroom to enable them to appreciate communicative practices.

Another aspect revealed by the student interviews was the popularity of mobile technology among the students. In particular, the audio was considered an invaluable source of English language learning. Since there was no use of audio in primary schools before the EIA interventions, the innovative use of mobile technology for listening and speaking activities seemed to be a major positive development in language education in Bangladesh. However, mobile technology is simply a tool and whether it has been deployed effectively for learner-centred ELT activities is still a question that EIA needs to tackle.

This study suggests that before implementing a large-scale project like EIA or any English language curricular innovation, it is important to consider learner perspectives in their sociocultural contexts. English language education policy makers may benefit from this.

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Appendix

Semi-structured group interview questions (translated into Bangla)

Attitudes to and perceptions about English language learning enhanced by mobile technology

1. What did you do in your last English class?

Find out about: listening to people speaking/songs on the audio; singing; answering questions; playing games; looking at posters/using posters to practise English; groupwork/pairwork; reading; writing; drilling (all speaking together, repeating); listening to teacher; does teachers speak mostly in Bangla or in English? using textbook; teacher explaining grammar rules; doing

grammar exercises; working by myself; role play. Also, of these activities what kinds are best for learning English?

2. Do you like learning English?

Why? Why not? Find out about: which kinds of activities students enjoy/ don't enjoy.

3. In your English class, what kind of things do you like doing most? Refer back to activities listed in question 1

4. Is there anything you don't like about your English classes?

5. Why is learning English useful?

e.g. for getting a job; watching foreign films, TV; reading for pleasure; reading for information; speaking to relatives; speaking to foreigners (why); helps learning other languages; makes a good impression; pleases my parents; to work or live abroad. Would you like to be an English teacher when you grow up? Why?